

School cuts hit adults

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Tuesday, May 1, 2012 at 4:00 a.m.

Maria Ornelas enrolled in classes at Sonoma Valley Adult School because she wants to communicate more effectively with the people who employ her as a housekeeper.

Not only have the classes in English helped her on the job, Ornelas, who is married and lives in Sonoma, also is earning positive feedback from her two sons.

"They say, 'Mom, we are so proud of you.' I want to be a good example to them. It's never too late to continue with your education," Ornelas said.

But that education no longer will be available through Sonoma Valley Adult School, which began in 1938 and after 74 years of serving the local community will shut its doors for good this month.

Adult schools are being closed statewide as a result of budget cuts and changes that make it easier for school districts to divert funding toward other programs. When Sonoma Valley closes its doors, Sonoma County will be left with just one adult school, in Petaluma.

"It's a tragedy," said Carol Waxman, principal of the Petaluma school.

County residents who want to better their English skills, earn a high school diploma, obtain their citizenship or simply learn an instrument or yoga positions will have to pin their hopes on space opening up in Petaluma or go to Napa, the next nearest city to offer adult classes.

The reality is that many people won't be able to make that drive, either because they lack transportation or because they can't find the time, said Pam Garramone, principal of Sonoma Valley Adult School.

She said that before 2008, Sonoma County had six adult schools serving more than 9,000 students, including more than 2,000 in Sonoma Valley.

She estimated that about half of Sonoma Valley's student body walks to classes held at Altimira Middle School, Sonoma Valley High School and the La Luz Center.

"It's going to be a big hole in our community," she said.

Two years ago when Jesus Alcaraz enrolled at the school, he was newly arrived from Mexico and did not speak a word of English. Now 19, Alcaraz is enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College and works at Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa as an attendant.

"I'm in the United States. I must speak English. I want to have a better job. I want to communicate with people," he said.



BETH SCHLANKER/ PD

Paulette Ross helps students Urbano Rojas, from right, Yolanda Ornelas, and Santos Salina during an intermediate/high level ESL class through the Sonoma Valley Adult School held at Altimira Middle School in Sonoma.

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In the library at Altimira on a recent Wednesday night, Caitlin Williams asked about 20 of her students if they could name a verb for her. After a student suggested the word "play," Williams guided the group through the different tenses of the word.

"So, for instance," she said in reference to the word's past tense, "Miguel could say, 'I played guitar last night with my wife.'"

Rafael and Ofelia Guerrero, who have lived in Sonoma for more than 20 years and are both U.S. citizens, said they are taking the class because they want to be able to communicate better with their grandchildren.

But with the school closing in May, they'll be stuck at level two of the four-level course.

"It affects us very much," Ofelia said in Spanish. "We want to learn English, and now we're not going to be able to."

The Sonoma Valley Unified School District board in January voted to close the adult school to save \$267,000. In doing so, the board took advantage of a change made by the Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2008 that took away guaranteed funding for adult education programs and gave greater discretion to local school districts on how to spend that money.

Faced with a \$2.6 million deficit for the coming fiscal year, the Sonoma Valley board decided money for the adult program could be better spent elsewhere.

"There were no good choices, unfortunately," said Justin Frese, the district deputy superintendent.

He said officials considered other options, including scaling back the adult program, seeking more funding through grants or going to a fee-based system.

"But there was simply no way to keep the doors open," he said.

Other adult schools are on the chopping block. But Waxman said she's not worried that Petaluma's will be closed, despite the school district cutting her \$1.1 million budget by about half in 2009-2010.

"Our superintendent and school board are very supportive and believe that if you cut programs completely, it's hard to bring them back," she said.

About 2,200 students are enrolled in the Petaluma school, and many of the classes have a waiting list. Priority goes to Petaluma residents.

Garramone said she didn't agree with the decision to close Sonoma Valley but she understands it.

"I can't say that what they did was wrong because their other options were just as bad," she said. "But as far as educationally and looking into the future at the hundreds of people who won't have access to this education, certainly they know I didn't agree with that."

She said the adult school employs a dozen part-time teachers, none of who are members of a union. The school has an additional 25 or so instructors for community classes, such as those in dance, arts and crafts and yoga.

Williams, a teacher at the school since 1999, said she's considering going back to school herself and looking for a new career.

Paulette Ross, who's taught at the school since 1997, said she'll also search for work to make up for the part-time hours she is losing.

"It's a tremendous loss," she said of the school's closing.

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